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Stuart, Henry Harvey

Labor and its problems

[Newcastle, N.B.]

[1917]

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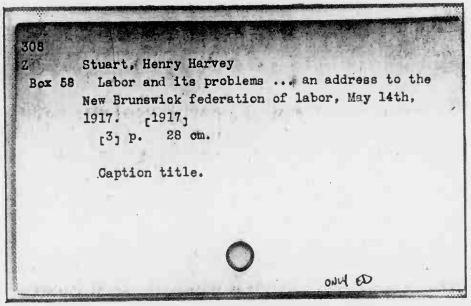
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Labor and its problems ... an address to the New Brunswick federation of labor, May 14th, 1917. [1917]
[3] p. 28 cm.
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LABOR AND ITS PROBLEMS.

BY HENRY HARVEY STUART

An Address to the New Brunswick Federation of Labor, May 14th, 1917.

Officers and Members of the New Brunswick Federation of Labor, Co-workers and Comrades:

No greater honor has ever come to me than that of addressing the representatives of the organized workingmen of my native province, and no greater pleasure, I assure you. You are the pioneers of the civilization that is to be—of that glorious commonwealth foreseen by the great and good of all ages and now about to be realized—in which all human beings shall have equal opportunities in life and in which all shall possess the fruits of their own labor, when the exploitation of one man or woman or nation by another shall cease, when the brotherhood of man taught in the Sermon on the Mount shall become the basis of the new order. Out of the great strife that is rending the world at this moment, and of which Canadian Labor and the Labor of the world is bearing the burden has already come the unification of many kindred but previously divided peoples, the freedom of one great nation, and a broadening of the bounds of liberty in many lands. It is for us by further organization and eternal vigilance to see that in the reconstruction period Labor comes fully into its own.

While doing their share on behalf of their respective countries and standing shoulder to shoulder with their fellow-citizens in defence of their homes and freedom, the organized workingmen of the world, who tried their best to avert the present struggle, have never ceased to work in the interests of an early, just and honorable peace; and, had the organized workers of the world—who, unfortunately, are still very much in the minority—had the reins of power, no war-lord would have been permitted to plunge his people into the worst war of history. The governments that started the war, it will be remembered, called no parliament to decide and held no plebiscite to determine the voice of the people. Why not? Because they knew that the people, as a whole, were peaceful and could not, by any fair means, be persuaded to wantonly attack their neighbors.

Shall Labor never come into its own?. Must the workingman forever till the ground and produce the crop for others to reap? Must he forever build palaces for others to dwell in? Must he forever build and maintain the magnificent halls of science while his own children must, to help out the family income, leave school before they have finished the seventh or eighth—in many cases the fifth or sixth grade? No! A thousand times No! This must go on only until the workingman wakes up, in a body, and as the result of thorough organization, both industrial and political, captures the government of the country and puts into effect the co-operative commonwealth. He can do this, for his class is the most numerous and if united would be the most powerful. What we need is more organization, more co-operation, more education, more agitation. To the worker should, and eventually must, belong ALL HE PRODUCES. The evil trinity of Rent, Profit and Interest must be abolished—the sooner the better.

While Labor has nobly done and is nobly doing its part in the present crisis, it has not been given a fair deal. The dice have been loaded against it. While the monied man has been permitted to lend his cash to the government at five per cent. interest, the unnecessarily high prices have brought the unskilled laborer and many of the skilled to the verge of starvation. When the country is in danger THERE SHOULD BE CONSCRIPTION OF WEALTH AS WELL AS OF MEN. When the common man risks his life on the battlefield why should the wealth of the rich be merely borrowed at five per cent., or, worse still, be employed in enterprises drawing much higher dividends? Why should there be any profit allowed in war time, or at any time, over and above the actual value of the work one performs? Why should a portion of "excess profits" be taken and not the whole?

I trust that this Convention of the N. B. Federation of Labor will demand THAT THE DOMINION GOVERNMENT IMMEDIATELY TAKE OVER ALL THE MACHINERY OF PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION AND EXCHANGE—the only procedure by which employment can be fairly apportioned, speculation abolished and the cost of living reduced to its natural level.

I trust it will demand from both Dominion and Provincial governments:

The abolition of the contract system on all public works;

The abolition of election deposits now required of candidates;

Direct Legislation and Proportional Representation; and.

Equal suffrage for men and women with equal pay for equal work.

And from the Provincial Government :

The Abolition of the property qualification for the offices of Mayor and Aldermen;

A widow's Pension Act;

Free school books;

Compulsory education up to at least sixteen years of age with free dental and medical inspection;

A Bureau of Labor and adequate amendments to the Workmen's Compensation, Factory and Health Acts,

That the Labor Movement of Canada, although it has achieved several successes, has had so little influence upon the government of the country, is due to the small proportion of the workers who are organized. Organization is the great need of our movement, for in union alone is there strength. Without union the individual worker is as helpless as an infant. Every man who works for wages should be organized. This work will, of course, be left to a few, but it must be done. Whatever expense we may have to cut off, let us always keep our dues paid up.

Industrial union without political union, and vice versa, is of little effect. We need both. In every city and town Labor candidates should contest every civic election; and there should be a candidate in every urban constituency of the province and Dominion. What a help if there were now five Labor members in the Local Legislature from St. John and Moncton! And two in the House of Commons from St. John!

THE WAGE EARNER OF THE TOWNS AND THE FARMER WHO DOES ALL HIS OWN WORK ARE NATURAL ALLIES, and the closest relations should be cultivated between them.

The average candidate of either of the old parties has no conception of the feelings and needs of the working class. Belonging generally to the mercantile or to the better paid professional classes, they are seldom in sympathy with the worker, and therefore not competent to represent him.

On Provincial Nomination Day—February 17th, 1917—in Newcastle Opera House, I asked the eight candidates for the Legislature—Messrs. D. V. Allain, John P. Burchill, Dr. F. C. McGrath, and Robert Murray, since elected; and L. Doyle, J. A. Gallant, J. L. Stewart and F. D. Swim since defeated—to state to the public the stand they would, if elected to the Legislature, take on the platform of the N. B. Federation of Labor, a copy of the fifteen planks of that platform being attached.

That these questions were to be asked had also been published in full in one local paper—The Union Advocate—and in the Moncton Daily Times two days before Nomination Day, and several of the candidates had also been given copies several days before.

The Questions

1. Workmen's Compensation Act—To be administered by the provincial government covering every worker, male and female.

2. Factory Act—Providing for a female inspector and reducing the hours of female labor.

3. Bureau of Labor Act—Provision to be made for a commissioner at the head of the bureau who shall be a member of the Provincial government with portfolio.

4. Fair Wage Schedule—To affect the work of all classes engaged in government work.

5. Legislation providing for at least 14 days training for motormen and conductors.

6. Health Act—Provision to be made for the practical inspection of all localities.

7. For the abolition of the contract system on all public works

8. The abolition of the election deposit of $100 now required of all candidates for the Provincial Legislature.

9. Direct Legislation through the Initiative (the right of a certain percentage of the electorate to initiate legislation and, on petition, have it submitted to a popular vote and, if supported by a majority of those voting, passed into law) and the Referendum (the right of the same percentage of the electorate, on petition, to have any Bill of the Legislature before being finally passed submitted to a popular vote which shall determine whether or not such Bill shall become law.)

10. Equal suffrage for men and women, with equal pay for equal work

11. An eight hour working day.

12. Government ownership of all public utilities

13. A Widows' pension law.

14. Free school books.

15. Compulsory education up to sixteen years with dental and medical inspection of the pupils at regular periods.

I asked permission to read the above questions to the audience so that they might the more readily follow the answers of the candidates thereto, but the Chairman ruled that I was out of order. The questions might be read, if there were time, he said, after the candidates had finished their regular speeches. I protested against this ruling, but the chairman refused to change his decision. They were read, in full, however, by the fourth speaker, Dr. McGrath.

THE ANSWERS

Five of the eight candidates answered the questions, either in whole or in part, as follows:

L. Doyle

Mr. Doyle said that he had had the questions only about an hour, and they could not be satisfactorily answered in a few minutes. They were vital questions. With justice to the questions more time was needed than was then available. Re the Eight Hour Law (No 11) he was in favor of it, but was afraid it would be of no benefit, as it would be impossible to pay ten hours wages for such a day. Re Education (No. 15,) he favored everything that would help education. Re Workmen's Compensation Act (No. 1), he was in favor of it. Re free schoolbooks (No. 14) that needed consideration. The way children use up books the supply, if free, would be hard to keep up. For the rest of the set of questions he was in favor of all of it.

D. V. Allain

Mr. Allain dealt with only one of the questions, No. 14, re free school books. He said that the government had promised free books, or cheaper books to be sold by Vendors at big salaries. But the Vendor system proved a failure. Thirty-three copy books had to be sold to gain 10 cents. If Vendors were allowed a right commission the books would be as dear as before. In Tracadie books are no cheaper than before 1908. Because of the Vendors' commission being so low and expenses so high, many would not handle books and the merchants were selling books at the old price. He knew of people having to come five miles to a vendor to save two cents on a book. One vendor, because of freight rates, etc., had cleared ten cents on $75 worth of books!

Dr. F. C. McGrath

Dr. McGrath read the whole of the questions which I had asked, commenting as he went along. His answers were as follows:

1.—We have a Workmen's Compensation Act with which, he confessed, he was not very familiar. He thought workmen pretty well compensated for what they do .

2.—We haven't much female labor and he hoped we'll have less. It should be our duty to prevent all labor on the part of females other than domestic. We as men should support them.

3.—No comment.

4.—Comment indistinct.

5.—Didn't affect us. If the cities want such legislation let them bring it in themselves.

6.—All would agree to this.

7.—No comment

8.—This might be a good thing. It would be a great relief to poor candidates.

9.—This required thought. Our system of legislation is complex enough now. If we had to go through all that is required in Direct Legislation we'd have no government left.

10.—No comment.

11.—We should pay for what work is done. If a man does a day's work in 8 hours or less, let him go home; if it takes him 15 hours to do a day's work let him stay till he does it.

12.—No answer.

13.—A good thing.

Here Ald. S. W. Miller of Newcastle, asked if people had come there to discuss such a program as that which was being read.

Dr. McGrath continued reading.

14.—No comment.

15.—No comment.

The chairman agreed with Ald. Miller that it was not right to take up the time with such things when time was scarce. If Ald. Stuart wished to come on the platform afterwards, let him do so.

Hon. John P. Burchill

Hon. Mr. Burchill said that it was in all courtesy due to Mr. Stuart to acknowledge receipt of the questions from him. To some of them he would say, No! Some demanded some thought, and are not questions before the public today, and he'd require some time for thought.

F. D. Swim

Mr. Swim said that all the questions were in order. As Ald. Stuart represented the Labor people, he had a right to know where the candidates stood on these questions. The majority of the questions were in the interest of the general public, and he could say, Yes! to them. Others required some consideration He would say to Mr. Stuart that he was favorably impressed with the majority of those questions.

There was no opportunity given me to speak at the close of the meeting.

On the answers of three of those who deigned to answer no comments are necessary. But, considering that the working men of the County have no organization to speak of, it is perhaps remarkable that two out of the eight candidates answered as favorably as they did.

No County newspaper but the Newcastle Union Advocate published either the questions or the answers and consequently a portion of the electors never heard of them.

If the above proves anything it proves the necessity of Labor organization, a Labor Press and Labor candidates in every constituency where Labor possesses any weight.

The average candidate for the House of Commons would not have discussed the Labor platform with any greater intelligence than the average candidate in this county for local honors. We must put no trust in other parties but wherever possible, run men of our own

In spite of all opposition, however, we are making progress. Had a Labor ticket run in this county last February it would, without any organization at all, have polled many votes. Labor has been called to the cabinets of France, Italy and Russia. It is supreme in Finland, and would be in Australia but for the unfortunate split over the question of referring Conscription to a popular vote. In Britain, a Labor member is one of the inner cabinet circle of five, while the Premier advises Labor to make the boldest bid for a new Britain after the war. In the U. S. A. nearly a million straight votes have been cast for the party of the revolutionary working class, and the passing of the Adamson Eight Hour Law for railway workers which was upheld by the Supreme Court shows which way the wind is blowing to the south of us.

Let us go forward with renewed hope and vigor never to rest from our agitation until the wage system is abolished, the co-operative commonwealth installed and the working class is the only class.

NOTE:—The above address was, on request of the Fredericton Labor Council, of which the writer was a member, prepared for delivery at the council's entertainment of the members of the New Brunswick Federation of Labor in Fredericton, May 14th, 1917, but, at the last moment, Mr. Stuart was unable to go to Fredericton, and the speech failed to reach the meeting.

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